

# Our man in the archive

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I watched the Adam Curtis film *Bitter Lake* this week. I'm not going to comment on the argument of the film, as I have no special insights into Afghanistan other than having followed the news for the last 15 years. However, a whole line of criticism has developed around the aesthetics of Curtis' films, particularly his use of film archive, that is worth responding to.

The internet was hailed as great breakthrough in multimedia, which it is of course. But it has also produced a revenge of the written word, and of those who believe writing is the senior service of media. Platforms like Tumblr or Pinterest have ended up devaluing images by reducing them to a churn; twitter actively defaces them, using pictures and video as fodder for jokes, constant fact-checking or abuse. Live-tweeting programs seems like a way of refusing to surrender to the pull of video and sound.

The left, with its tradition of print journalism, and critical theory, created by people trained in philosophy and literature, have form here. *On Photography* and *Camera Lucida* could be seen as attempts to cut visual mass media down to size, by those who felt threatened by them. Marshall McLuhan's career is now an academic morality tale: don't get too into television or you will become vacuous. (The exception is John Berger who was an artist before he began writing and has retained a positive sense of making images.) There is a Protestant and iconoclastic (in the original sense) undercurrent here.

The criticisms of Curtis' use of archival footage and his editing techniques have some of this spirit. At work here is a misunderstanding of what he is doing. Curtis' films are histories. Almost all serious written histories are led by the use of archival sources. In practise most of these were produced, and are kept, by institutions of various kinds. So the argument that Curtis is 'lost in archives' or 'or lost in the BBC archives' is a non-criticism. His use of audio-visual sources is also close to the practise of 'thick description' where historians build up a picture of a past society or event by piling detail on detail and example on example. This is a methodical *and* rhetorical strategy, and one used by several different historians from Raphael Samuel to Keith Thomas to Saul Friedländer. It should be noted that this technique involves a fair bit of direct quotation or repetition of material that the author may not agree with and is often presented without much comment. Walter Benjamin fans will see the similarity with the Arcades Project; indeed Keith Thomas has written of his admiration for that work. I can't help noticing the link with Humphrey Jennings' *Pandemonium* either – Curtis' father was Jennings' cameraman. This is also the technique of many works of oral

history. The statement that *Bitter Lake* is an 'emotional history' is therefore in keeping with this tradition.

This sheds a different light on complaints about decontextualisation too. This has been perhaps the complaint against thick description as a method ['quotation out of the context' is the standard charge]. But this is a problem of all methods: they show some things and reveal others. It is true that, unlike history writing, Curtis' films have no footnotes and apparatus: but this is true of *all* factual films. Having more talking head experts would not solve the problem; it would merely introduce multiple arguments from authority.

The other point about archives is this: progress in history has generally been made by bringing new sources into play or finding new ways of looking at them. Indeed, it should be emphasised how underused television and film archives are in creating works of histories [as opposed to illustrating them.] This is partly due to the conservatism of the academic form, but also because it is very hard to get access to these archives and even harder to re-use the material publicly. Ironically therefore, the 20<sup>th</sup> century, that supposedly radical and modernist century, has some of the most conservative and restricted forms of telling its history.

There is a deep literalism at work in criticism of his technique. People seem to want every image or video to come with captions and explanations. Or perhaps every frame has to feature Fergal Keene telling us when to feel sad. Curtis is creating a new form of multi-media history. Who knows where others will take it next?